

another keeps us sane, healthy and our many and various roles in balance. Humor leaves us feeling lighter in spirit, a little less harassed and a little more eager to face the difficult problems of the day. Laughter is a way of communication which is essentially and exclusively human. It is meant to dispel evil and make fun of the follies of life. We must nourish what humor we have, encourage it and spread it far and wide. For laughter, kindly or corrective, foolish or purposeful, is the world's much-needed and palatable medicine. It is a recognized therapy, a real specific for disease.

Humor as an emotion is inborn. But a good sense of humor develops in stages and over a lifetime. In my own life I have found that every time I master a fear or anxiety and laugh at it, my sense of humor grows richer and deeper. I once asked a friend of mine when she had learned to laugh. She said, "I began to laugh when my life was in a state of total disaster." Laughter restores perspective, and eventually the taboos that fence in our sense of humor collapse from lack of support. Humor gives us freedom, and freedom gives laughter. Everything done with humor helps us to be more human.

Humor Is Healing

In his book *Getting Well Again* Dr. Carl Simonton suggests that emotional stress may be a cause of cancer. He argues that if depression can impair the body's immunological functions with a negative chemical change, then it is logical to assume that the development of a positive emotion such as humor will effect a positive chemical change. This argument is further supported in Norman Cousins' book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, where he demonstrates what laughter has done in his own life to overcome illness: "... I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain free sleep."² Laughter brings us into health.

What has been discovered by present-day physicians and writers is supported through the writings of such saints as Thomas Aquinas and Philip Neri. St. Thomas presents the theory that the

A poor juggler knelt before the Virgin Mother's shrine and prayed that he might have something he could give, for he had no money. He thought perhaps some money would fall from heaven into his outstretched hand, so he could give that. But no money fell. Then into his heart came the voice of the Virgin.

"Rise, my son, and give what you have," she said. So he rose from his trembling knees and drew the three little balls from his pocket and juggled those as beautifully as he could. Then he heard laughter—the loveliest laughter ever heard on earth. The Babe Himself was laughing with joy.
(French fable)

In his love for us, God has given us the gift of laughter to share with others. It is a laughter that comes from a well-developed sense of humor. What is humor? Humor is that emotion which promotes objective thinking, curbs pride and keeps us honest. In his book *Understanding Laughter*, Charles R. Greener says "... a sense of humor is generally considered a person's most admirable attribute."¹

The ability of one part of ourselves to laugh at

open ourselves to spontaneity and the ability to play.

It is the growth and maturing of this sense of humor that helps us to rediscover the childlike spirit within—the need to love, laugh, sing, wonder and search. The noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead, suggested that we encourage the growth of this spirit by finding a child to communicate with. The openness and spontaneity of the child will help us to overcome much of the negative training in our lives that causes us to be solemn and formal in the expression of our emotions as adults. Sometimes we have forgotten how to laugh, and the innocence of a child reawakens that ability. To the child, reality is not limited to what they can see with the physical eye. Reality is a combination of what they can see with the physical eye and the inner eye. They see beyond what is visible and see life as it is. Children can teach us much in how to release tension through laughter.

Another suggestion to help in the growth of a good sense of humor is to find a friend with whom you can laugh. Laughter is contagious. People love to laugh. Washington Irving said, "Honest good humor is the oil and wine of merrymaking, and there is not jovial companionship equal to that where the jokes are rather small and laughter abundant." In his biography, Joe E. Brown writes of his experience at the front during World War II:

It's difficult to weigh a laugh and find out just what it's worth. To a boy lying under a shade tree beside his favorite fishin' spot on a lazy morning, one laugh more or less doesn't count up to anything. They come easy there.

But you put that same boy in the broiling mud of a Pacific island, with mosquitoes and flies and hardship in eternal monotony, and you multiply that by hundreds of thousands, and you've got a war job for a comedian. A laugh there was as important as quinine; a laugh was a kind of quinine when morale had bogged down. . . .³

Books too, provide us with an experience of humor. The nationally syndicated columnist Erma Bombeck, and British writer James Herri-

human being is the person who can laugh at his own mistakes, while St. Philip Neri sees humor as the road to salvation. This popular saint loved to make people laugh. When he taught at the seminary he would tease rather than scold those he instructed—he believed he could win more souls for God by humor and laughter than by scorn.

To be sure, life is not humorous; but if we try, we can find humor in most things. I do not believe that the God of joy wanted us to be always solemn. Human beings are imperfect and full of contradictions and unpredictable behavior—the very essence of humor. If we can learn to understand one another, ourselves and life, we will be more able to see and accept the humor in our human idiosyncrasies.

For instance, in the Lincoln-Douglas debates of the 1800s, Douglas accused Lincoln of being two-faced. In response Lincoln turned to the audience and said, "Ladies and gentlemen of the audience, I leave it to you: if I had two faces would I be wearing this?" In our own century, movie comedian Joe E. Brown capitalized on the fact that his face could be considered funny. This was not because the knowledge of the fact pleased him but because he accepted it and turned it into an advantage and gift for making people laugh. From the first day he realized people enjoyed him, he knew he was meant to continue in his role as self-appointed ambassador of good-will.

The Growth of Humor

Humor cannot exist without truth. Truth breaks into earthly situations through humor, occasioned by the incongruities of human life. Truth is the lamp that illuminates the gap between who we are and who we want to be. A glimpse of the gap is what triggers the humor and consequently the laughter. At that moment, we see ourselves as God sees us, and we see our imperfections. Good humor helps us to see ourselves as we are. The Christian virtue of humility occurs at the point where we can laugh at ourselves and keep our pride under control. In recognizing and accepting our inconsistencies, we

ot are two writers that I rely on for an evening of good humor. They have the ability to see the absurdities in everyday life and write about them with a gentle, light touch. At a different level the daily comic strip provides us with a ready opportunity to renounce the "real" world by reading of life's foibles.

Humor Is Liberation

For the Christian, the development of a good sense of humor is to become a "fool for Christ." It means being set free from trying to get things, position and power. We are freed to be who we are and to see the world as God, not man, sees it. Humor allows us to see ourselves as creatures yet in the image and likeness of God. When humor makes us laugh, then we can say with Sarah, "God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6).

There is much more that could be said about humor, but I believe my friend Marie Barfnecht's dream will say it best:

I was walking down a wide corridor in what seemed like a hospital with beautiful, curving, white walls on one side; curved panels divided by windows and at the end of the hall, maybe twenty feet away, a swinging glass door.

A man dressed in white coveralls with something in one hand was pushing open the door when I noticed he had a crewcut, like Don's [her deceased husband]. As he pushed the door he turned a little sideways and I saw it was Don! I yelled his name and he turned and ran to me, picked me up in the air, hugged and kissed me again and again.

I felt how strong his love had become for us—large and stronger than ever, not diminished in any way by the years, but infinitely strengthened.

The only thing he said to me was one thing that I was to remember and never forget. "God has a tremendous sense of humor. More than anyone you know, or can imagine. He has a sense of humor."

That was all and I woke up. What it means to me as I think about it over and over is that God wants us to rejoice in our lives, not take ourselves and our problems too seriously, to give up our pompous self-importance and see the beautiful, humorous, joyful side of life. I think He wants us to know that all He has made is good and is given for our pleasure. He wants us to be His children, rejoicing with great joy in the world He has made as He unfolds His plans for us.